JOURNEYS

THE ACCIDENTAL ORACLE

Business leaders and politicians around the world look to Canadian Jim Carroll to help them make sense of what's next. And his CPA training has been with him all the way. **BY CHRIS POWELL**

Somewhat unusually for an acclaimed futurist, Jim Carroll is looking back. It's a chilly morning, just days into a year that's already feeling like people who can predict what's coming will be in demand.

Carroll is ensconced in his home office in Guelph, Ontario, reminiscing about a career that has seen him go from self-described "accounting dude" to a speaker sought after by some of the world's leading corporations.

"I never expected that I'd be living this strange life," says Carroll, whose dozens of books have collectively sold more than one million copies in Canada, who shares booking agencies with the likes of Barack Obama and Richard Branson, and who has presented to organizations as disparate as NASA, Disney, the World Bank and the PGA.

"I'm 65, and I can't believe I've had such a weird career."

Looking back, there were some early indications that Carroll's future might turn out to be something rather more extraordinary than 30 years with a respected accounting firm and a gold watch upon retirement.

Like, what about the time in July 1976 when he was briefly a roadie for 1970s hard rock legends Kiss and April Wine in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Moncton, New Brunswick? "It was pretty wild," he recalls. "I got to carry the red bell on-stage for [one of April Wine's signature songs] 'Oowatanite.'"

That was right after high school, just before he began his studies at Dalhousie University. He had yet to turn 16. Although someone thrust into university life as a young teen might have felt compelled to rock and roll all night and party every day, Carroll was different, quickly discovering an acumen for numbers.

"I didn't have any grand plan to be an accountant, but the first year, I was getting straight As and I started hearing about accounting as a profession, I thought, *Well, I'll do that*," he says.

His stint as a "hard-core" accountant, spent in the nitty-gritty of auditing, finance and taxes with Halifax-based Thorne Riddell (later Thorne Ernst Whinney, then KMG Thorne Riddell, then Peat Marwick Thorne) was relatively short, from 1979 to about 1983, followed by roughly four years as a CA with Ernst & Whinney, a forerunner to Ernst & Young.

But then came the path he would never have predicted. Although today there are actual courses and schools dedicated to futurism, like the Futurist Institute, Carroll found his vocation quite by accident.

It began when he fell into the orbit of a Vancouver man named Frank Ogden, a renowned futurist who went by the name Dr. Tomorrow, and the two did some gigs together. Ogden's career was winding down, and Carroll, who was already talking about future trends in the context of technology, saw an opportunity to pick up the mantle.

More than 36 years later, he has established himself as one of the world's premier futurists, an in-demand speaker sought out by governments, trade organizations and companies to provide insight into what lies ahead.

Things are a little quieter now, but at one time, there were book tours, best sellers, innumerable press interviews and even autograph requests. There was a 1995 VHS tape called "the Family Guide to the Internet," a hilariously cheesy guide to the nascent information superhighway, presented by IBM, in which Carroll, billing himself as a "global Internet consultant," meets with the Newbie family to discuss things like how to connect and use newsgroups, and follow proper etiquette. It was, he says, 30 years later, "the most embarrassing thing I've ever done."

He was the go-to guy for insight and commentary about the Internet when it was still in its infancy, even listed in *Sources*—a reference guide that was a must-have for journalists

Carroll speaks to varied audiences at up to 25 events a year